

Roger Olson, *Against Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011).

Roger Olson offers here, in 5 chapters (plus an introduction, a set up chapter [my term], a chapter describing the TULIP system [his phrase], and conclusion), against the heirs of Calvin and their understanding of God's Sovereignty contra divine determinism (chapter 4) [where the meat of the book is first exposed], Election contra Double Predestination (chapter 5), Atonement and not Limited Atonement (chapter 6), and Grace contra Irresistible Grace (chapter 7).

There are also two appendices but more on these later.

Olson is a passionate, engaged, informed, and engaging writer. He clearly has not a little pride in his Arminianism and he wears it proudly and well. His aim throughout the volume is clear; he wishes to rescue the reputation of God from the false claims of the Calvinists. Calvinists, in his estimation, tend towards ideas like determinism and exclusivism and double predestination and grace that isn't graceful but forceful.

He is, in short, an apologist, a defender, of God's good name and righteous honor. On his white horse he rides to God's rescue, because, as he sees it, he believes that

... the time has come for someone to point out the flaws and weaknesses in this particular type of Calvinism – the type widely embraced and promoted by leaders and followers of the young, restless, Reformed movement (p. 22).

And in a tone more fiery

I believe someone needs finally to stand up and in love firmly say “No!” to egregious statements about God's sovereignty often made by Calvinists (p. 23).

We can see, I think fairly, in the pages of this volume that Olson doesn't have a problem with *Calvin the man* but rather with Calvin's offspring and theological heirs and interpreters. And yet he does clearly have problems with Calvin's thought as it gives his heirs seed to plant, water, and harvest in theological ideas Olson finds distasteful and inedible.

Olson, when all is said and done, is concerned for the honor of God first and foremost and he thinks the new Calvinists are misrepresenting God. So he feels compelled to rise to God's defense. And therein lies the problem: God doesn't need defenders and only hubris would lead us to think ourselves capable of managing it.

The greater defends the lesser, the lesser never defends the greater. And yet Olson, driven by his fear that God may come off badly if the Calvinists are believed, inserts himself between the troubled public and the misconstrued and misunderstood Deity and bridges the gulf between them.

Here's where the appendices previously mentioned come in and the irony becomes thick. In appendix one Olson discusses 'Calvinist attempts to rescue God's reputation'; which is exactly what Olson has been striving to do throughout the volume! So while in the appendix Olson describes Calvinist efforts to spare God being seen as the author of evil he apparently doesn't recognize that his central concern is the same sparing of God's reputation.

Naturally, then, a question arises: what is Olson so afraid of anyway? God is a 'big boy' and if he doesn't wish to be misunderstood he is perfectly capable of clearing things up. Perhaps God, in Scripture, is portrayed as the ultimate source of both good and evil, because that's how things really are. Olson surely must know Isaiah 45:7-

יוֹצֵר אוֹר וּבּוֹרֵא חֹשֶׁךְ עֹשֶׂה שְׁלֹום וּבּוֹרֵא רָע אֲנִי יְהוָה עֹשֶׂה כָּל-אַלֶּה: ס

That's fairly clear isn't it? 'I form light and create darkness, making peace and creating evil- I am Yahweh, the doer of all these things!' Isaiah doesn't defend God on this count, he simply recognizes that God is free and just and can do whatsoever he pleases. Why then does Olson find fault with the Calvinists but he never utters a word against Isaiah? Or, if he accepts the idea of inspiration, why doesn't he find fault with God himself who says this not of another but of himself?

The volume concludes with a second appendix, this one titled 'responses to Calvinist Claims' as though Calvinists were members of a cult and the true Christian, the good Christian, the Arminian Christian, must have at hand and in mind anti-cult materials with which to confound the poor ignorant lost creatures.

I've been a little hard on Olson because the whole apologetic enterprise is offensive to my soul. God is God and he needs none of us wormy wretches to stand up for him as if he is incapable of standing up for himself. True enough, Scripture tells us to 'always be ready to give an answer for the hope that is in us' (1 Pe 3:15) but not once does it anywhere urge us to rise in defense of God. The entire notion of apologetics is laughable from a biblical viewpoint.

But that doesn't mean that this book doesn't deserve a reading. It does. It is excellently written and I was unable to put it down (except for a few hours of sleep). It occupied my attention for the nearly 7 hours of reading it required. It is only the underlying premise (i.e., that God needs to be helped out) that is faulty.

Finally, two closing observations of a technical nature: first, this volume should really have been bound with Horton's *'For Calvinism'*. The editors and publisher should have either interwoven the respective chapters dealing with similar topics or simply published Horton's work followed by Olson's or vice versa (the order of the two is immaterial). If that had been the case, the 'debate' the two excellent scholars carry on in their volumes could be seen for what they are: opposing sides of the same coin. At approximately 200 pages per volume, a 400 page single volume is clearly not impossible.

And second, indices should be included- especially a Scripture index (always desirable in theological tomes); and a select bibliography should also have been added. Other readers may be satisfied with endnotes but I appreciate indices and bibliographies. Given modern technology either are simply a series of mouse clicks.

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